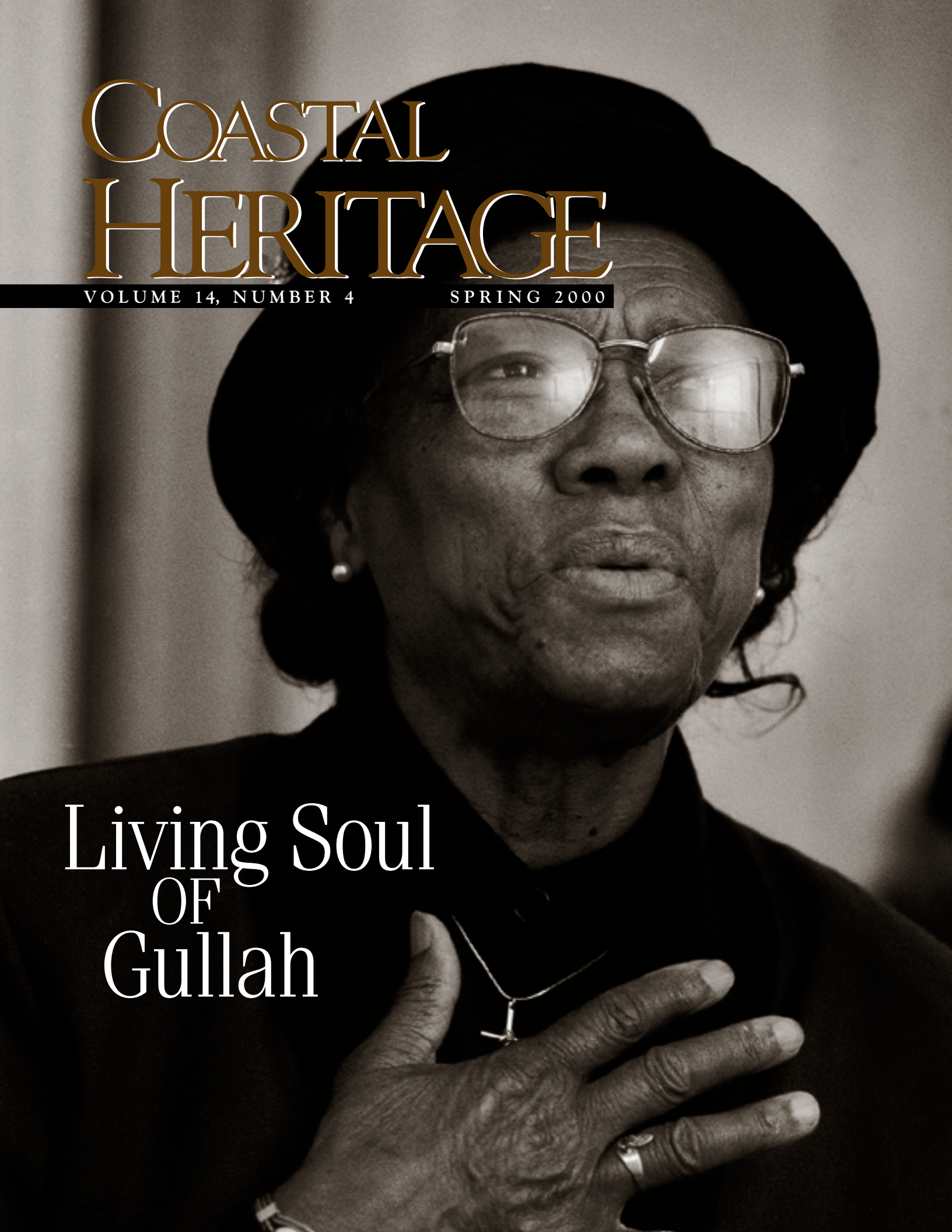


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Living Soul
OF
Gullah



CONTENTS

3

LIVING SOUL OF GULLAH

Spawned by Africa and Europe, by slavery and isolation, the Gullah culture is fading into the modern world.

13

SOUTHERN BLEND

ON THE COVER

Rev. LuElla Smith offers testimony about her Christian faith at Echo House, a community center in North Charleston. Today, Gullah traditions can be found in African-American religious practices, such as testimonies, syncopated clapping, and call-and-response.

PHOTO/WADE SPEES



A ROAD LESS TRAVELED. Two boys stand on a country road in Lowcountry South Carolina in the 1910s. Only a few generations ago, the Gullah culture thrived along isolated stretches of the coast. PHOTO/COLLECTIONS OF THE SOUTH CAROLINA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.



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LIVING SOUL OF GULLAH

By John H. Tibbetts

**Spawned by Africa
and Europe, by slavery
and isolation,
the Gullah culture
is fading into
the modern world.**



CASTING THE WATERS. As Sam Moultrie, Sr., guides a flat-bottomed boat he built by hand, Sam R. Brown, Jr., casts a net into a St. Helena Island creek. For generations, Gullah people have supplemented their diet and income by shrimping, crabbing, and fishing. PHOTO/WADE SPEES.

It's the oldest American story, told countless times. For generations, an ethnic or religious clan, tightly knit by language and religion, huddles in a New World rural enclave or urban ghetto, enduring prejudice and poverty. Then abruptly ancient bonds fray. Strangers move in and disrupt local traditions, elders complain about their heritage's neglect and exploitation by outsiders, while young people leave home in droves to gain better jobs and education.

It's the immigrant story of assimilation and loss, told by Irish Catholics in Boston, Russian Jews in New York, and Chinese Buddhists in San Francisco. But over the last 50 years, groups with centuries-old roots in America also have been dragged into the mainstream, including the Cajuns in Louisiana, highlanders in Appalachia, Native Americans in every state, and the Gullah people of coastal South Carolina.

The Gullah people are descendants of various African ethnic groups who were forced together on South Carolina plantations. When Ashantis, Fantes, Fulas, Ibos, Mandingos, Yorubas, the Bakongo cultures, and other peoples arrived as slaves in America, they established a creole language—Gullah—from English and African sources.

The vocabulary of every creole language is European—English, French, Spanish, Dutch, or Portuguese. The slaveholders “had to communicate with the slaves, so they made sure the slaves used European words,” notes Philip D. Morgan, historian at the College of William & Mary. In the English colonies of North America, slaves used the English-based Gullah language to communicate with one another.

Yet down through centuries, the Gullah people managed to retain extensive African sources in their

speech and folklore. The grammar of Gullah is African, and many aspects of Gullah culture—religious beliefs, arts and crafts, stories, songs, and proverbs—were derived from African sources. The Gullah people have preserved more of their African cultural history than any other large group of blacks in the United States, noted William S. Pollitzer, professor emeritus of anatomy and anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in a 1999 book. “So many Africanisms survived in Gullah culture,” says Pollitzer. To some degree, “it was a re-creation of Africa within the New World.”

The Gullah language is unique, the only lasting English-based creole in North America. “Nothing like it survives in other places” in the United States, says Morgan. “Similar creole languages may have been spoken outside of coastal South Carolina (in the slavery era), but they disappeared quickly. By the early 19th century, there was little evidence that other creole languages existed in the Chesapeake region and North Carolina,” where slaves adapted to Standard English.

Gullah culture thrived in places with a significant black majority. On most of the large plantations in coastal South Carolina, slaves greatly outnumbered whites. In All Saints Parish, between the Waccamaw River and the Atlantic Ocean, there were nine African-Americans to every one white person in 1860, for example. Even the smallest rice plantation in the parish had nearly 100 slaves, and the largest plantation had more than 1,100.

Today, many think of South Carolina’s Gullah people as the black residents of James, Johns, Wadmalaw, Edisto, St. Helena, and Hilton Head islands. But the classic Gullah culture actually existed on the mainland tidal area, along rivers for 30 miles inland, known as the “rice coast,” says Charles Joyner, historian at Coastal Carolina University. The rice coast and the



A Lowcountry field band in the 1910s.
PHOTO/COLLECTIONS OF THE SOUTH CAROLINA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

Gullah culture extended south from Winyah Bay near Georgetown through Georgia into northern Florida. Even today, says Joyner, the Gullah culture may remain as strong on the mainland as on the sea islands.

After the Civil War, when slaves were emancipated, many Gullah people began to assimilate into southern black society. During the

next century, large numbers of Gullah people left rural areas for Savannah and Charleston, or they became part of the great migration of blacks north to cities on the eastern seaboard, especially Philadelphia and New York City.

Yet by the end of the Second World War, many Gullah people still stayed home in rural areas along the coast. “They maintained a separateness,” says Lawrence Rowland, historian at the University of South Carolina-Beaufort. “Gullah people were marginalized economically and socially.”

Modern influences diluted the language, and many African words were lost, replaced by Standard English. Starting in the 1950s, resort development, racial integration, the civil rights movement, and economic opportunities transformed the coast and hastened Gullah’s decline.

Highways and condos and golf courses and hotels replaced “praise houses” and graveyards and farms. Many sea-island people sold their property and moved away. In some cases they were forced to sell their land, unable to afford the rising taxes spawned by resort and suburban development.


Like all oral societies, Gullah is fragile. Without a written language, the passing of knowledge within a culture can quickly break down. In many of today’s endangered oral cultures, children are not interested in learning the old ways, which disappear as elders, the repositories of knowledge, die out. An oral culture is transmitted primarily through families, and when there is a break—even of just 30 years or so—the loss often cannot be regained.

“For years, we were told that our language is broken,” says Marquetta L. Goodwine, founder of the Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition based on St. Helena Island. “A generation of people were told, ‘You’ll never get through life talking like that.’” City blacks often sought to distinguish themselves from the Gullah speakers they regarded as inferior. Goodwine remembers, “Anybody living in town would say, ‘I’m not Gullah; I’m not from the island.’”

A WORLD APART

Two lucrative crops—rice and sea-island cotton—were the driving forces behind the creation of Gullah culture.

Within the first decade after Charles Town’s founding in 1670, settlers had already brought slaves with them from the West Indies. In the first few years of the Carolina settlement, between one-fourth and one-third of the colony’s population were Africans, according to Peter H. Wood, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill historian, in a 1974 book. At first, slaves worked alongside their owners,



NET PROFIT. *Luke Smalls, a retiree on St. Helena Island, sews a net to catch shrimp, fish, and crabs. When he was a boy, his uncle taught him how. "In those days, the only way you could get a net was to sew one. If I do it steadily, I can make a net in three or four weeks. But many young people aren't interested in learning. They can make money at things that take less time."* PHOTO/WADE SPEES



Assimilating

The Gullah people have not been alone in facing the confusion and difficulty of assimilating to mainstream American life. For hundreds of years, immigrants to the United States “from all over Europe have had to withdraw from their own cultures to become Americans,” says Rosalind Saunders, historical consultant for Brookgreen Gardens.

Over the past 30 years, many rural Southerners have also struggled to adapt to a bewildering, new world. In one generation, for example, Hilton Head has been transformed from a rural, forested island to a resort community visited by millions of tourists each year, just one small part of a massive social and economic transformation—the modern Americanization—of the Deep South.

While the coastal economy has thrived and newcomers have poured to the shoreline in record numbers, historic folkways of all kinds have been disappearing. “The old Southern traditions—black and white—are under assault,” says historian Lawrence Rowland of the University of South Carolina-Beaufort.

struggling to survive on the heavily timbered, swampy land.

Early on, the English settlers searched for a staple crop they could export, planting cotton, indigo, ginger, grapes, and olives—without much success. Settlers exported wood products to other colonies, but their immediate economic salvation was in raising livestock for sale overseas. By 1678, Carolina was already exporting beef, pork, and lumber to Barbados and the rest of the West Indies, notes Wood. And this trade to the Caribbean was so crucial that during the first 30 years of the colony some English documents referred to “Carolina in ye West Indies.”

In the mid-1680s, a new rice seed was introduced from Madagascar to Charles Town, and soon this grain, called “Carolina Gold,” was planted on inland swamps. By 1700, Carolina Gold was a lucrative staple crop, which planters exported primarily to Europe. And that same year, planters sent ships to Africa looking for slaves to import to Charleston.

“Through the early 1700s, Africans, native peoples, and Europeans—slaves, indentured servants, landowners—all lived in the same houses, under the same roofs,” says Rosalind Saunders, historical consultant at Brookgreen Gardens. By 1720, though, Southern planters established profitable commercial farms in the isolated malarial swamps near coastal rivers, and slaves outnumbered whites in the Lowcountry. A large rice plantation might rely on several hundred slaves to build, operate, and repair massive flood-control structures, and to plant, harvest, and transport the grain. With a captive labor force, planters produced millions of pounds of rice each year for international markets—and they could afford to build manor houses and separate shacks for slaves.

In the colony’s first years, constant contact between blacks and whites forced many slaves to learn English and to assimilate quickly to Euro-American culture. But later, as the numbers of slaves on Carolina plantations grew, it appeared that a smaller percentage of Africans spoke English well enough to be understood by whites, noted Wood. And as planters became richer and left for the cities, the

black majority increasingly lived within their creole world.

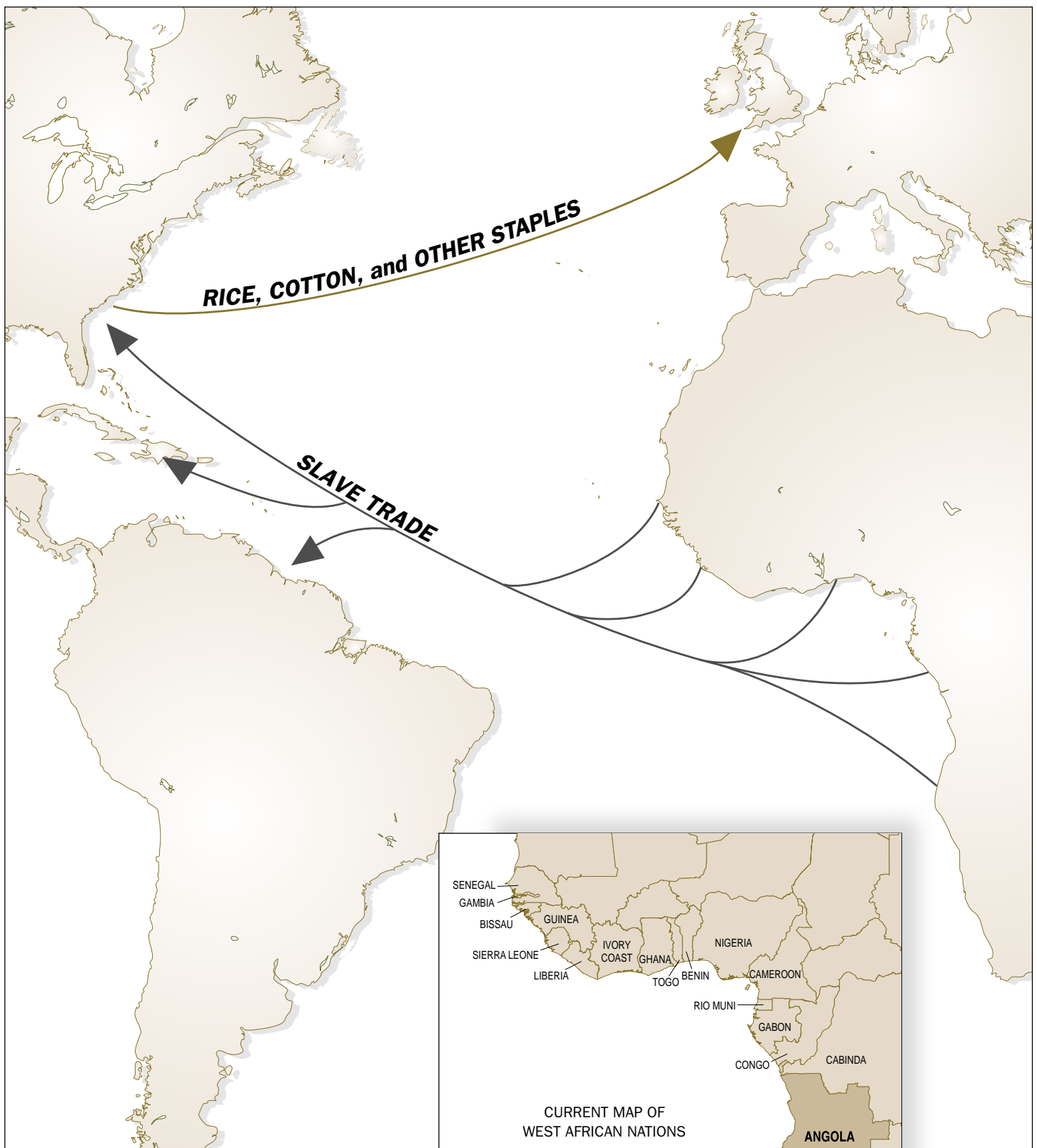
Over nearly 150 years—from 1670 to 1808—at least 120,000 Africans were hauled legally into Charleston, the primary slave-trading port for the southern Atlantic seaboard. But many traders looked for opportunities to move slaves illegally or off the books, especially during times of rising import duties. A large number of slaves, particularly in the colony’s earlier years, remained in South Carolina to work on coastal plantations.

The Caribbean connection remained important during the history of the Carolina slave trade. Before arriving in North America, a slave was considered more valuable if he had been channeled through the West Indies for “seasoning”—that is, if he had been acclimated to diseases and slavery conditions in the New World.

Throughout the colonial era, Carolina slaveholders showed a preference for people from the rice-growing areas of Africa—the Windward Coast, including Senegambia and Sierra Leone. Africans were cultivating rice for centuries before Europeans entered the slave trade, and certain ethnic groups were imported deliberately because they knew how to grow rice, says Joyner. Africans may have brought over techniques to irrigate rice fields in early Carolina.

Transatlantic trade carried not only slaves into the New World, but also diseases that were endemic in Africa. Mosquitoes that transmitted malaria and yellow fever were inadvertently transported on slave ships and, ironically, may have helped to sustain African traditions along the southern Atlantic coastline. After a long history of exposure to malaria, Africans had developed a degree of resistance to this disease, which devastated whites. To escape the disease-ridden swamps, planters retreated to Charleston mansions in fever season. “The slaves were often left to themselves when the whites left” during warm months, allowing slaves greater flexibility over their lives, says Pollitzer, with the result that many African traditions and practices survived.

By the second half of the 18th century, a new system of labor improved the lives of large numbers of slaves along the coast.



In 1787, after the American Revolution, South Carolina banned slave importations, but from 1804 to 1808 the slave trade was reopened to accommodate cotton planters. In just four years, South Carolina was flooded with 40,000 Africans. Most of these slaves—60 percent—were from Angola, often called “N’Gulla.” Many historians believe that the term “Gullah people” originally referred to Angolans.



Cultural Survival

Until 30 years ago, many historians agreed that slavery and segregation had been so devastating to African-Americans that their cultural traditions had been completely crushed. The prevailing view was that blacks lacked their own authentic music, crafts, and literature, so they absorbed those of Euro-Americans. For decades, “the consensus was that there wasn’t much black culture,” says historian Charles Joyner of Coastal Carolina University.

Black intellectuals scoffed at this. “The white American has charged the Negro American with being without past or tradition,” wrote the novelist and essayist Ralph Ellison in 1958. But white Americans, he noted, also denigrated and misunderstood their own traditions, and genuflected to European culture, which they considered the seedbed of all enlightenment in American life.

Starting in the late 1960s, however, “a generation of scholarship has emphasized the strength of black culture” in America, says Joyner. Scholars such as Joyner have delineated the breadth of African-American folkways, and black influences on modern music and language and religion.

Yet as the thriving nature of slave culture was emphasized in universities, some scholars began to lose sight of the destructive power of slavery and segregation, says Joyner. He realized that his work and that of his colleagues was misunderstood when a new generation of students “didn’t know how horrible slavery and segregation could be.” Now, he adds, scholars are providing a “harsher depiction of slavery,” while also acknowledging the survival of black culture.

Many rice plantations had become highly sophisticated operations, where tasks were specialized and clearly demarcated. Most field hands performed a specific task, such as hoeing a given amount of land a day. When their jobs were done, usually by early afternoon, they often spent the rest of the day working their own plots of land, which could be a quarter of an acre, where they grew rice, corn, potatoes, and tobacco, and kept their own chickens, cattle, and hogs.

This “task system” allowed slaves some degree of economic independence from whites. Lowcountry slaves by 1800 established extensive trading networks for their crops and crafts. The plantations were located on the interstate highway systems of the era—the coastal rivers—and many slaves interacted with river traders. “The rice plantations were not isolated in the 19th century,” says Joyner. “They had landings on rivers that tied them to the great American ports, and rivers were efficient ways to get around.”

Visiting their estates, planters were sometimes surprised or angered by their slaves’ entrepreneurship, wrote Ira Berlin, University of Maryland historian, in a 1998 book. In 1806, Combahee River planters complained about “peddling boats which frequent the river....for the purpose of trading with The Negroe Slaves, to the very great loss of the Owners, and Corruption of such Slaves.”

Along the rice coast, early planters trained slaves in the trades—they were blacksmiths, boatmen, bricklayers, carpenters, coopers, and machinists. Soon, though, planters believed that blacks’ skill in the trades had gotten out of hand. In the 1730s, the South Carolina governor and legislature petitioned the King of England against the practice of training slaves as “Handicraft Tradesmen.” This measure failed because skilled slaves were increasingly needed to manage the complex machinery of hydraulic pumps and grain mills that made the rice plantations so profitable. By 1800, about one of four lowcountry slaves worked at some skilled trade, noted Berlin.

The task system did not transform



REVIVAL Young and old enjoy the “community sing,” a weekly gospel music, the deepest root of jazz and blues and rock and

slavery’s cruel essence. Slaves remained chattel, subject to arbitrary beatings and other punishments; their families were often broken up, children and spouses sold off and never seen again. “You can’t have an evil system that doesn’t have an evil effect,” says Joyner. But it’s clear that the task system did provide some breathing room for the creole culture to survive.

Soon after the American War of Independence, the task system was extended to sea-island cotton. A number of lowcountry planters, broken financially by the war’s interruption of trade, enthusiastically embraced sea-island cotton, hoping this silky, luxury product would help them out of bankruptcy.

But to boost the value of their own bondsmen and to provide security against



ly tradition on St. Helena Island. Gullah's cultural influences resonate strongly in African-American
roll. PHOTO/WADE SPEES.

slave revolts, South Carolina rice planters had pushed through a state ban on the importation of slaves in 1787. Within a decade, many planters changed their minds and called for a new importation of slaves to grow and harvest sea-island cotton, an increasingly profitable staple. So from 1804 to 1808, the South Carolina slave trade was re-opened, flooding the state with new Africans. In just four years, 40,000 slaves were brought into South Carolina—one-third of all the legal, documented slave trade through Charleston since import records were established. Of the documented slaves in those four

years, 60 percent were from Angola, says Rowland. In those days, it was common for Angola to be called “N’Gulla.” Many historians believe that the term “Gullah people” originally referred to Angolans. But the Lowcountry Gullah were not just Angolans; they were a mix of different ethnic groups.

On the sea islands, the huge influx of Africans sustained a caste system among slaves, says Rowland. Carolina-born creoles, acculturated to slave life, were generally the plantation drivers and skilled workers. The newly arrived Africans performed the less desirable tasks and usually held lower status within slave communities. There was a

constant process of “creolization” throughout the South in the slavery era. New slaves struggled for position against second- and third- and fourth-generation creoles, while also re-infusing plantation life with African traditions. In 1790, one South Carolina Lowcountry slave in ten had been born in Africa; in 1810, one slave in five had been born in Africa.

After the Civil War, the plantation’s economic and social system collapsed. Union armies had damaged estates, and many freedmen did not want to work for their former owners. During Reconstruction, African-American men got the right to vote, and many former slaves became small landholders. In Beaufort County, blacks enjoyed a remarkably high degree of land ownership in the late 19th century, but there was also extreme segregation. In 1880, when Beaufort County blacks outnumbered whites 11 to one, the overwhelming majority of freedmen lived in deep backwoods while most whites lived in the city of Beaufort, says Rowland. On the sea islands, the Gullah people owned land where they could subsist in communal communities. Some freedmen travelled by boat across coastal rivers to labor on the mainland, but most stayed on the islands, farming small plots, gathering clams and oysters, and netting shrimp, crabs, and fish.

The sea islanders’ independence may have slowed their assimilation into the broader society. Yet living apart provided advantages, especially in the 1890s when life became considerably harsher for South Carolina blacks. Jim Crow laws legally segregated whites and blacks in public places, wiping out political and civil rights that African-Americans had held since Reconstruction. Separate white and black schools were mandated, and African-Americans were disenfranchised. Racists spread terror in some South Carolina counties. After Cole Blease became South Carolina governor in 1911, he openly endorsed lynching, calling it “necessary and good.” Interacting in this explosive

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climate, blacks and whites kept up a dangerous, intricate dance. “For whites, a misstep could be socially embarrassing; for blacks, it could be fatal,” wrote Walter Edgar, University of South Carolina historian, in a 1998 book.

Yet the Gullah people, secure in their black majority, were often insulated from the worst of “The Crow.” Goodwine recalls stories of sea-island elders who, when venturing to the mainland, were shocked by treatment from whites. In a 1930 book, T. J. Woofter, Jr., a white visitor to St. Helena Island, remarked that sea islanders seemed confident, lacking the “embarrassment found among Negroes who have had the color line constantly emphasized.” Sea islanders, he added, “have not been trained to expect frequent rebuffs from white people.”

THE GREAT CHANGE

In 1957, Charles Fraser, the son of a Georgia timber magnate, began clearing land to build Sea Pines Plantation, a resort on Hilton Head Island. Soon developers saw the sea islands’ economic potential and bought land there to build additional resorts. Land values shot up.

The new resorts turned sea islanders’ lives upside down. Although blacks owned just 20 percent of the land on Hilton Head before the island was developed, they had been free to travel anywhere, hunting and fishing on property that belonged to absentee white landlords. But developers built gates and fences, cutting blacks off from fishing and hunting grounds and sometimes even traditional cemeteries.

The resorts also changed the racial equation—the black majority was a majority no more. “On Hilton Head, when development came to that island, segregation was the law,” said Emory S. Campbell, director of the Penn Center Inc., an educational and cultural center for African-Americans on St. Helena Island. Speaking at a 1982 S.C. Sea Grant Consortium conference, Campbell said: “Prejudices were prevalent. People became ashamed of their culture; therefore, they abandoned it. In most cases, they took on the culture of the (newcomers).”

Nevertheless, some black residents of Hilton Head sought change. Along with a bridge to the mainland, the resorts brought doctors, a hospital, better roads and public services, and improved economic opportunities, wrote political scientist Michael N. Danielson of Princeton University in a 1995 book. One sea islander, who had found himself in a new world after developers arrived, welcomed “the day they turned on the electricity.”

On the other side of the ledger, rapid development has piled tax burdens on local residents who can’t keep up with the swiftly rising cost of living. Today, Beaufort County enjoys the second highest per-capita income of any county in the state, and a high percentage of college-educated residents. But the county still has a sizable percentage of poor people and residents without high-school diplomas, and many blacks work in low-paying resort service jobs.

Along the coast, many black-owned land titles are tangled affairs. Extended families often collectively own land as “heirs property.” In many cases, heirs who live far away in New York or New Jersey want to sell off valuable property they never see or use. Meanwhile, other family members desperately want to hold onto land that’s been held for generations. “You see heirs fighting each other,” says Jabari Moketsi, publisher of the bi-weekly *Gullah Sentinel* newspaper based in Beaufort. “Some people are selling out their family legacy. Gullah is about land,” says Moketsi. “If you can’t hold onto the land, you can’t hold onto the culture.”

The Gullah culture, however, is also bound up with the language, which has become more like Standard English over the past 40 years. “With integration, there were dramatic changes in language and a loss of Gullah words,” says author and archivist Sherman Pyatt with the Avery Research Center for African-American History and Culture. “Young people who leave and go off to college will change their manner of speaking. They lose words, the tone and pronunciation of Gullah even when they mix with blacks from other parts of the country and the state.”

ANCIENT TRADITION.

Marquetta L. Goodwine, founder of the Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition, demonstrates rice winnowing at the Charles Pinckney National Historic Site. "All the sea islands have Gullah culture," she says. "But it's not like it used to be." Although St. Helena and Wadmalaw islands have perhaps the strongest Gullah traditions remaining on the South Carolina coast, even there "we're the 'Last of the Mohicans.'"

PHOTO/WADE SPEES.





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RESURGENCE?

Each year, some links to Gullah history become increasingly fragile. One elderly woman in Georgia can accurately sing a song that was passed from generation to generation and traced by musicologists to an identical one heard today in Sierra Leone, yet she doesn't understand the Gullah words.

Robert S. Jones, Jr., director of the Cole-Heyward House, an historic home in Bluffton, S.C., once owned by slaveholders, often asks local craftspeople to demonstrate their skills for visitors. Still, Jones says, it's difficult to find anyone who knits traditional cast nets, an important Gullah craft. "It's a lost art. It could take \$150 to knit a cast net, but you can go out and buy a net for \$10. You can't make a living at 10 cents a day."

Sweetgrass basketmakers struggle to sustain their craft, weaving these baskets from local materials, which are disappearing. "Sweetgrass used to be plentiful, but development has destroyed it in many places and new subdivisions have closed it off," says Jeannette Lee, coordinator of the Original Sweetgrass Marketplace Coalition.

Still, some Gullah traditions are experiencing an Indian summer, however brief. Sweetgrass baskets do continue to sell at stands along Highway 17 and at the Charleston Market and other tourist spots. Gullah tours are available for tourists in the Charleston area and on the sea islands. Some historic plantations, which once avoided the topic of slavery, now have integrated information about Gullah into their programming.

In schoolrooms, storytellers dramatize

the ancient stories and fables, and singers clap out the ancient rhythms in concerts. On St. Helena Island, the Penn Center, Inc., organizes heritage festivals that draw visitors from around the world, provides youth programs on Gullah culture, and houses local history exhibits.

A children's television show, "Gullah Gullah Island," is broadcast in the United States and Canada. Articles in national newspapers and magazines praise Gullah's tenacity and historical significance, scholars from universities pour into the Lowcountry to interview Gullah people, and English translations of the old parables have been published.

The Gullah people, though pleased at their sudden popularity, are puzzled, notes Goodwine. For years, she points out, sea islanders "were told, 'Don't be who you are.' Now we hear the very same people saying, 'Look, Gullah is the greatest thing ever!'"

This is an extraordinary turn of fortune for a people who were commonly denigrated by historians only a generation ago. The Gullah language was routinely described as "baby-talk" English, and the culture was considered primitive. But a new generation of historians has celebrated the slave culture's complexity and richness. And "now folks of the Gullah culture have the opportunity to describe it themselves," says Michael Allen, former chairperson of the South Carolina African-American Heritage Council and a U.S. Park Service ranger.

Some say that the Gullah language remains just a lingering remnant, a museum piece. Within another generation it could disappear altogether. Historians, however, point out that all cultures change constantly with new influences and people. So Gullah life, which began as the blending of various traditions and ethnic groups, is just taking another vibrant form within the melting pot of modern America.

Not so fast, argues Goodwine. Gullah can continue to survive as a distinct, unique culture, she says—but only if the people can hold onto their land and teach the younger generation about their traditions. "Keeping the land is a priority," says Goodwine. "Yet we also need to keep spirits intact, to nurture and restore minds, to remind ourselves what our language is, what our culture is." ♡

Gullah expression

*sho ded
tebl tappa
krak teet*

English root

*sure dead
table-tapper
crack teeth*

English translation

*cemetery
preacher
to speak*

English: "To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your coat as well."

Gullah: "Ef anybody knock one side ob oona face, mus ton de oda side an leh um knock de oda side too. Ef somebody take oona coat, mus gem oona shat too."

Source: *The Legacy of Ibo Landing: Gullah Roots of African American Culture*, edited by Marquetta L. Goodwine. Clarity Press, 1998.

Southern Blend

Perhaps more than any other American region, the South is a mix of African and European. Slaves and their descendants introduced African speech patterns, crafts, religious practices, and music into white society. African musical traditions, of course, were the primary influence on American gospel, jazz, blues, and rock-and-roll. African traditions can be found even in the country music of lily-white mountain Appalachia; the banjo was an African instrument that was later modified and taken up by Euro-Americans.

Throughout the region, “white Southerners had their old cultures Africanized by their black neighbors and black Southerners had their old cultures Europeanized by their white neighbors,” wrote Charles Joyner, Coastal Carolina University historian, in a 1999 book.

“Whites and blacks borrowed from one another,” agrees Philip D. Morgan, historian at the College of William & Mary. “There was a great deal of cross-fertilization between blacks and whites.”

The novelist and essayist Ralph Ellison, who died a few years ago, often wrote about the inextricable blend of black and white that is America. In the 1950s, he argued that “most American whites are culturally part Negro American without even

realizing it.” Ellison noted that American English is a “language that began by merging the sounds of many tongues, brought together in the struggle of diverse regions. And whether it is admitted or not, much of the sound of that language is derived from the timbre of the African voice and the listening habits of the African ear.”

Over the centuries, black culture and language have probably affected coastal South Carolina more than any other segment of the country’s population. The overwhelming black majority along most of the rice coast meant that whites were in constant contact with African-Americans.

“In places where you had large populations of black people and smaller populations of white people, whites more often adopted black traditions,” says historian Lawrence Rowland of the University of South Carolina-Beaufort.

The Gullah people of coastal South Carolina were particularly important contributors to language in the region. “Local accents of both whites and blacks were affected by Gullah,” says Joyner. “Even today, the influence of Gullah is pretty strong” in Charleston and along the coast. Within the white community, he notes, “the Gullah traditions have survived strongly among the elite who had been plantation-raised.”

Guide helps visitors find history

The S. C. Sea Grant Extension Program worked with the S.C. Heritage Corridor and the African-American Heritage Council to produce a guide, “Touring the S.C. African-American Trail of Charleston, Colleton and Dorchester Counties.”

This guide helps visitors explore a route of special and diverse places, highlighting points of interest in African-American heritage and black-owned businesses. Request your copy by calling (803) 734-2303 or view it on the Web at <www.sc-heritagecorridor.org/html/coastal2.html>



Related Websites

Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition: <http://users.aol.com/queenmut/GullGeeCo.html>

Penn Center, Inc.: <http://www.angelfire.com/sc/jhstevens/penncenter.html>